

## All Talk: Dialogue and Intimacy in Spike Jonze's *Her*.

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Running head: Dialogue and Intimacy in Film

### Abstract

Sarah Kozloff's groundbreaking *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (2000) went some considerable way towards addressing what she sees as the 'anti-dialogue bias' (14) in film studies and its neglect of the form. Nevertheless, the focus in most recent studies (e.g. Jaeckle 2013) remains on dialogue as a window to character psychology, and on the realism of the representation of speech and verbal events rather than on what Kay Young (2001, 90) calls the 'processural acts of two people conversing'.

This chapter will focus on the ways in which film dialogue can enact and foreground the complex mechanisms underlying conversational interaction, and demonstrate the ways in which verbal interaction may be as much about concealment and solipsism as it is about intimacy and revelation. With close reference to Spike Jonze's *Her*, which centres on the developing relationship between a lonely writer and an operating system designed to fulfill his every need, the chapter will examine how the film's foregrounding of character dialogue to the exclusion of almost everything else challenges convention and relies on the audience to read between the lines of the characters' utterances. The chapter will draw on theories of dialogue from literary criticism, narratology and linguistics as well as film studies to argue that dialogue in film is not just about exquisitely staged scenes or displays of auteurish experimentation, but plays an integral role in the audience's active engagement with the characters and their investment in their unfolding relationships.

The chapter intersects with issues raised by Piwek's analysis of computational dialogue generation in its discussion of human-computer interaction, and with Richardson's chapter on television dialogue in its consideration of dialogue in a multimodal context.

### Introduction

Described by one critic as "drowning in words" (Spaeth 2014), Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) seems to offer the filmic equivalent of the dialogue novel (Thomas 2012) where we are almost completely reliant on what the characters say in terms of plot and action, and where any engagement with the characters relies on our ability to commit to extended periods of what Kozloff calls 'close listening' (2013, xv). This demands focused attention from the reader/viewer, but helps to create the effect described by Kozloff (2000) and others as "overhearing" the characters' most intimate

thoughts and exchanges. Other film directors such as Richard Linklater have experimented with slow-paced talkative movies, for example the trilogy *Before Sunrise/Sunset/Midnight* (1995-2013) which focuses on the unfolding relationship between the characters played by Ethan Hawke and Julie Delphy. But in these movies, the nonverbal chemistry between the leads is as important as anything they say, as is the backdrop to their relationship, including romantic European cities (Paris, Vienna) and the Greek islands.

In Jonze's movie, Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with a computer operating system (or OS) who lacks a physical body and whom he can neither see nor touch. What is distinctive about the dialogue in *Her* is that there is very little to distract the viewer from the central characters' interactions, so that we have to "enact" as much as "witness" (Young 2001, 12) what is going on between them. Aside from a disastrous blind date and meeting with his ex, very little happens in the movie outside of Theodore's relationship with Samantha, and because she lacks a physical body, we cannot even "see" her, or rely on information from gestures, facial expressions and so on in deciphering her words. Samantha is able to perform certain actions (e.g. compiling Theodore's letters into a book, arranging a surrogate sexual partner for him), and her story follows an arc of its own, as she evolves and develops her own needs and desires. But most of what "happens" in the film is talk – interactions between Theodore and his wife, colleagues and friends, and the duologues between Theodore and Samantha that take up so much of the film's screen time. The dialogue is also the prime focus in terms of trying to understand not only Theodore's mental state, but that of Samantha and the extent to which she is capable of emotion, or of articulating and pursuing her own needs and desires. For some, this

is the big problem with the film: Spaeth (2014) complains that “the blunt vocalization of every urge and emotion” makes the dialogue “vapid” and full of “trite epiphanies,” a failure of style over substance. However, I will argue that Jonze’s film is more than a quirky experiment, evoking as it does the “drama of escaping our individualism” (Young 2001, 3-4) while also providing some interesting insights into our growing dependency on technology and how this has led to reappraisals and debates about what it means to be human.

### **Approaches to film dialogue**

It has become almost routine for studies of film dialogue to begin by bemoaning the “anti-dialogue bias” of both practitioners and film scholars (Kozloff 2000, 14). Kozloff ascribes this partly to the way film is taught, placing the emphasis on technical aspects of the moving image, while relegating dialogue to brief discussion in relation to sound. She argues that this makes it difficult to move away from a focus on the “much showier and attention grabbing” visual spectacle, meaning that “learning to listen to dialogue is hard” (2013, xiv). Kozloff and others try to address this by exploring language-centred methods such as “close listening,” the argument being that “patient study of film speech yields insights into the aesthetic, narrative and cultural dimensions of cinema that otherwise go unappreciated and unheard” (Jaeckle 2013, 1).

However, discussion of film dialogue still tends to focus on the self-avowed “dialogue auteur” or encourages analysis of specific “lines” (Jaeckle 2013, 5) rather than approaching dialogue as the “processual acts of two people conversing” (Young

2001, 90). Meanwhile, as discussed in the chapter by Batty and Hashimi in this volume, for the film industry, and the writers producing film scripts, the mantra remains “show, don’t tell” with the preference being for courses in screenwriting or film production to begin by highlighting strategies for avoiding too much reliance on talk, for “stripping down” the dialogue and creating strong individual character voices and relying on “subtext” (Batty 2012). While some genres, for example the romantic comedy, are recognised as being very reliant on dialogue and banter (Young 2001) even here it may be silence and miscommunication that take the limelight. For example, much attention has been paid to the ending of *Lost in Translation* (dir. Sofia Coppola 2003), featuring an inaudible conversation between the two main characters, which leaves the audience guessing as to the true nature of their relationship and what the future might hold.<sup>1</sup>

The question of how the success of film dialogue may be evaluated raises some interesting issues. We can all quote (and misquote) memorable lines from films (“Play it again, Sam”), and as with discussions of dialogue in prose fiction, writers may be commended for having a good “ear” for creating realistic character speech (Quentin Tarantino is often discussed in this regard). However, if we focus on dialogue as interaction rather than individual lines of speech, and if we accept that what characters say may conceal as much as reveal aspects of their personality or psyche, then a more “holistic” approach may be necessary (Herman 2006, 81), taking into account the “larger environment” of the talk and the fact that the boundaries between speech, thought and action may be “fuzzy.”

Cognitive narratology has shown how readers of fictional texts expend considerable effort and energy constructing fictional minds for characters based on even the most minimal cues such as in scenes of “pure dialogue” (Palmer 2004, 207). Recently, work on cognitive narratological approaches to film has also stressed the importance of analysing the “sensory coding of various modalities” (Eighan 2015, 113) that goes on simultaneously and seamlessly when watching a movie, recognising that as we watch or listen to scenes of characters in conversation with one another, visual cues and other auditory information such as music, diegetic sound effects, all contribute to our response.

Similarly, recent linguistic and stylistic approaches to film and television dialogue (Richardson 2010; Piazza, Bednarek and Rossi 2011) have emphasized the need to look beyond language and text to provide multimodal analyses of dialogue in action. Drawing on earlier work on dramatic dialogue (e.g. Burton 1980; Herman 1995) and its borrowing of terms and models from conversation analysis, pragmatics and politeness theory, these approaches do go some way towards taking into account the “larger environment” in which talk and conversation takes place. However, the focus is still predominantly on dialogue as providing access to the “mind style” of characters, and the methodology remains firmly focused on scenes and duologues. In my study of fictional dialogue (2012) I argued that such a focus helps to perpetuate a particular “idea of dialogue” which obscures the extent to which so much of our speech is messy, problematic and not containable or bounded by clear beginnings, middles and ends. In this chapter, rather than focus exclusively on specific scenes, I will explore the intertextual and paratextual contexts for the conversations taking

place between the characters in *Her*, drawing on the published script (Jonze 2011) for stage directions but focusing most of my analysis on the dialogue in performance.

A key question when analysing dialogue in film is whether there is any identifiable “dramatic mastermind” (Richardson, this volume) shaping conversations between characters, as well as controlling aspects of performance and production. In *Film Dialogue* (Jaeckle 2013), a whole section is devoted to the “dialogue auteur,” and the discussion includes directors as well as writers. In the case of *Her*, Jonze is credited as both director and writer, and press interviews and articles concerning production and post-production all contribute to the impression of his having overall control. In the discussion that follows, I will refer to Jonze as the main creative source behind *Her* while also acknowledging that the actors’ interpretation of their roles, and aspects of design and production all contribute to the film’s success. In the digital age in addition to the supplements that come routinely with DVDs of movies, audiences can have unprecedented access to production notes, interviews with the production team, cast members and so on from both authorized and unauthorized online sources. When it comes to *Her*, therefore, specific details of the film’s production and its promotion provide an important context for its analysis.

### **Paratexts and Production**

Following the release of *Her*, considerable discussion has focused on Scarlett Johansson’s role and the background to her involvement in the film. In particular, the fact that the film was originally shot with a completely different actress in the role of the operating system has been the subject of some discussion. The film was originally shot with the English actress Samantha Morton in the lead role, and it was only in

post-production that Scarlett Johansson was brought in as the director felt that Morton's performance "wasn't working for what the character needed" (Jonze, cited by Eggertsen 2013).<sup>2</sup> This meant Johansson spending time in an "automated dialogue replacement booth" revoicing the lines originally spoken by Morton. Even though we do not "see" Samantha in the film, the effects of this switch seem to go beyond those of the voicing and delivery of the lines.

It has been suggested that Johansson may have been chosen for the role because of what critics describe as her "lack of dramatic expressiveness" and inability to "emote" (thycriticman 2014). Indeed, Johansson seems to have made a deliberate play for "post-human" roles in recent performances: as well as portraying a cold-blooded extraterrestrial killer in *Under the Skin*, in 2014 she also starred in Luc Besson's *Lucy* as a human who transforms into a supercomputer, and reprised her role as the biotechnology-enhanced Black Widow in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. It has been suggested (Brown 2015) that these films all explore and problematise contemporary notions of female perfection in relation to technology, drawing on Johansson's star image and the myths that surround her.

In addition to paratextual and intertextual readings associated with Johansson as the star of the movie, a great deal of attention has been paid to the production and post-production phases of filming, facilitated by the numerous interviews given by the director and others. For example, Jonze has revealed (cited by Buchanan 2014) that, unlike many other Hollywood directors, he often writes new dialogue for the actors in the post-production phase, showing how the script evolves as the actors' performances and all the other elements of production come together. For the filming

of the scenes between Theodore and Samantha, both actresses delivered their lines in soundproof boxes, to try to keep as close as possible to Theodore's situation, where he can only imagine a physical presence for Samantha. However, it was also reported by editor Eric Zumbrunnen that a woman did appear on set representing how Theodore imagined Samantha (Zeitchik 2013), and of course the audience will have their own visual images and memories of Johansson based on her other screen and media appearances.

### **Intertexts and Genre**

Piwek's chapter in this volume provides an analysis of some of the many science fiction and horror films which have explored the nature of human-computer interaction. Piwek argues that a familiar theme emerging from the dialogue in these films is that of a growing conflict between the goals of the machine and those of the human interlocutor. In many films projecting how we will interact with machines in the future (for example the Terminator franchise), the fear is that machines will outsmart us. The machines also tend to act as a mere mirror or foil to the human characters. What is distinctive about recent treatments of the subject (for example the film *Ex Machina* (2015) or the Channel 4 tv show *Humans*)<sup>3</sup> is that not only do they portray relationships between humans and robots or machines as more plausible and routine than in previous representations, but they raise the question as to what it is that human relationships offer that machines cannot, and portray machines that have personalities, needs and desires.

*Her* draws on recent technological innovations in artificial intelligence, and specifically consumer versions of intelligent personal assistants such as Microsoft's



Cortana, or Apple's Siri.<sup>4</sup> So instead of being depicted talking to robots or staring at screens as in previous representations, in Jonze's movie technology is seamlessly integrated into the characters' daily routines, and the focus is less on the technology itself and more on what it allows people to do. While these services have become more widely used and integrated into the latest "wearables," the novelty and sense of play remains. This is evident from the myriad ways users have devised to try to trip up Siri or Cortana with nonsensical or ironic requests, as illustrated in the "social media sitcom" *Siri and Me* by Esmerelda Kosmatopoulos (2013). Moreover, as discussed in Domsch's analysis of simulated talk in videogames in this volume, there is also a simple sense of delight to be had from getting any response from a "machine," especially where that response challenges or surprises the user in some way.

In addition to drawing on previous representations of robots and machines, *Her* picks up on many themes and preoccupations from Jonze's previous movies, particularly his fascination with accessing other people's consciousnesses (*Being John Malkovich* 1999) and exploring the affordances and limitations of the physical body. Theodore Twombly is a perfect illustration of the "typically Jonzian sad sack" (Nathan 2014) struggling with failure in both his emotional and professional life. *Her* also shares Jonze's predilection for blending the surreal and the familiar (as in *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation* (2002)). For example, as Theodore walks the streets of LA he is surrounded by people talking to invisible others, but the cleanliness and order are almost too perfect, "as if an Apple Store vomited all over South California" (Tse 2013). With strong echoes of *Blade Runner* (1982) the cityscape, set in the "slight future" (Jonze, cited by VanHemert 2014) is a strange blend of Shanghai and Los

Angeles (the film is set in LA but shot in Shanghai), and throughout the film the colour orange features prominently, from Theodore's shirt, to the screen backdrop for the OS, and actress Amy Adams's hair. Even the soundtrack to the film, provided by the Canadian band Arcade Fire and designed to convey "the longing of Theodore," was briefed by Jonze to be electronic but not too "synthetic" (Jonze, cited by Eggertsen, 2013).

Of course *Her* has most in common with the genre of romantic comedy, where word play and repartee are at the heart of the action and the growing sense of the "betweenness" of the protagonists (Young 2001, 4). In the long tradition of "couples talk" going back to Shakespeare and beyond, conversation has been understood as a substitute for sex (Kennedy 1983), a way for couples to bypass social norms or barriers and to use all the resources of speech and verbal interaction to give each other pleasure. Underlying this we can perceive both a challenge and subscription to the "idea of dialogue" (Thomas 2012) as something which is mutually beneficial, equitable and ultimately enlightening. So while miscommunication creates dramatic tension and reflects the difficulties facing the couple, continuing to talk to each other seems to provide the best guarantor of achieving clarity and intimacy.

Described by Brody (2013) as "a classic pen-pal story" tracing the growing intimacy between two people destined to be together but separated in time and space, the plot of *Her* follows a familiar trajectory including the false start (Theodore's disastrous blind date) and the protagonist's temptation (his encounter with a sex surrogate). The film also has many echoes of the "odd couple" subgenre and scenes of "pillow talk," a staple of the romantic comedy where the darkness and hushed tones of participants

often results in candid exchanges and intimate disclosures. As the camera looks down on Theodore's face and body as he lies or reclines, the lighting and sound all help to compensate for the fact that of course Samantha isn't physically 'there' with him at all, so the sense of increased intimacy is all in Theodore's (and the audience's) mind. Such scenes help to foreground how our "reading" of lines of dialogue from film relies on aspects of the mise-en-scène and on the performances of the actors, particularly their facial expressions, which contribute to the "showing" of their emotion or introspection (as discussed in Mikkonen's chapter in this volume).

*Her* also shares with the romantic comedy the idea of the couple learning to read each other's minds, and increasingly echoing and mirroring each other's behaviour. While this is mainly Samantha following Theodore's lead, this is by no means exclusively the case, and so Samantha in some ways continues the tradition of strong female roles in the genre. The dialogue in *Her* offers us the same "ongoing, mutual adjustments of style and word choice" that we have seen from previous film representations (Young 2001, 7) and also the same struggles as the couple negotiate their roles and adapt to their changing sense of their interrelationship.

As many critics have pointed out, it is classic jealousy that ends the relationship, as well as the sense that as Samantha evolves she grows further and further apart from Theodore. For Samantha, along with growing aspirations and intellectual development comes self-doubt, identified by Jonze (cited by Buchanan 2014) as crucial to her increasing separation from Theodore. Thus, whereas Theodore begins in a parent role (as discussed by Batty and Hashimi), quizzing Samantha and offering her advice, he becomes not only more dependent on her, but more restricted in his

range of interests and activities, while she engages in various forms of self-development, including writing music and engaging in discussion with zen philosopher Alan Watts (voiced by Brian Cox).

### **Simulating Talk**

As discussed in Piwek's chapter, early attempts at creating computers that talk back to us were essentially reactive and tied to specific "scripts." Despite this, one of the most famous experiments, Weizenbaum's ELIZA, seemed able to convince participants in experiments that they were talking to another human.

Based on the ELIZA experiment, the dangers of projecting emotion and responsiveness onto the computer screen are played out to comic effect in David Lodge's novel *Small World* (1984), where a university professor becomes more and more dependent on the machine to whom he pours out his troubles and innermost secrets, much to the amusement of his colleagues, who turn it into a means of torturing the poor man even further (for a fuller discussion of this see Thomas 2012). In Lodge's version of ELIZA, the computer program is restricted to conversations "of a contextually specific type, with well-defined rules and goals" (154), and for the programmer responsible for Dempsey's deception, a clear line in the sand is possible because ELIZA "can't really talk, you know. It can't actually *think*" (243). Yet for Lodge it seems the concern is not so much with what ELIZA can or can't do, as with the ways in which the "uncommitted intimacy" (Moran and Hawisher 1998, 90) the machine offers seems to highlight a fundamental lack and hunger for intimacy in the human subjects who come into contact with it.

Looking back at the ELIZA experiment in her recent study of the relationship between technology and our sense of identity and self, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle argues that it “revealed more than people’s willingness to talk to machines; it revealed their reluctance to talk to other people” (2011, 282). Turkle also discusses the film *Blade Runner* (1982), a key intertext for *Her*, and its exploration of a world where “humans and robots look and sound alike,” arguing that it shows us a world in which “We will not care if our machines are clever but whether they love us” (286).

Reflecting on how the production team for *Her* imagined how Samantha would behave, designer K.K. Barrett (cited by VanHemert 2014) says they saw her as having an ELIZA-like “good bedside manner,” having learned to “act like you’re listening.” But as we shall see, Samantha soon evolves from merely reacting to Theodore or following a set agenda, to pursuing her own goals and interests which are increasingly in conflict with Theodore’s, in keeping with previous film representations as discussed by Piwek.

The ability to engage in conversational interaction, to use and understand humour and nuance remains key to testing whether artificial intelligences can pass as human. At the outset of their relationship, Samantha mainly provides functional assistance by reading out Theodore’s emails or updating him on his stocks and shares. Meanwhile, Theodore finds talking to Samantha “weird,” and she also seems aware of the strangeness of the situation, asking him “Do you want to know how I work?” But very soon this getting-to-know-you process starts to take on the more familiar pattern of the early stages of a romantic relationship and we move from a simulation of conversational interaction to something indistinguishable from the “real thing.”

Initially, Samantha takes all her cues from Theodore, and even relies on him for her sense of who she is: “Was that funny? ... Oh good, I’m funny.” Her ability to work out the subtext of Theodore’s utterances is also something that she verbalizes and makes explicit at first: “I take it from your tone that you’re challenging me,” helping to convey to the audience that this is something she needs to learn to do. But Samantha’s sense of alienation from Theodore as an “un-artificial mind” is quite short-lived: as she tells him, “in every moment I’m evolving.” So whereas at the outset it is Theodore who laughs to himself, soon Samantha joins in as she “lets out a big laugh” and starts to make playful and mocking references to their situation. As they only have each other’s words to go on, there is a lot of metadiscoursal analysis and reflection. For example, Theodore says at one point “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with my computer,” to which Samantha replies, “You’re not. You’re having this conversation with me.” This kind of playful banter and verbal mirroring is a classic device in cinema to signal growing intimacy between two characters. While in early cinema it was the censors that meant that intimacy could only be verbally conveyed, in the case of *Her* talking to one another is the only means by which the characters can achieve intimacy because one of them lacks a physical body.

In all of these scenes, the camera focuses mainly on Theodore and his reactions, although occasionally a “device” metonymically represents Samantha, or we see Theodore and other characters putting on headphones so that they can speak to her.

This contrasts with the scenes where Theodore converses with the ‘real’ embodied women in his life, where the director is able to use tried and tested techniques for conveying a sense of intimacy or tension between the characters, for example using

close ups and reaction shots to convey emotion and to build up a distinctive sense of the dynamics and rhythm of the relationship being depicted.

Samantha's responses are limited to what can be vocalized (she laughs a lot), but as in any dialogic encounter, silences and pauses also carry significance. In many ways the conversations between Samantha and Theodore are reminiscent of a telephone conversation where the characters rely on sound to compensate for the lack of visual stimuli. Just as in the early days of the technology people soon discovered the erotic potential of this form of communication (Thomas 1997, 2012), in *Her* having sex with virtual others appears to be a way for "sad sacks" like Theodore to find release without all the baggage of being in a relationship. Just as with the telephone, initially Theodore and Samantha only have sporadic contact when one of them chooses to "call up" the other, and we get the same exacerbated sense of "alienation and loss" (Lodge 1990, 80) from silences, pauses and the awkward "terminal exchanges" (Clark and French 1981) when they sign off ("I'll talk to you later"). However, to give the audience the sense of an ongoing and evolving relationship, in *Her* the conversations between Samantha and Theodore do not always have clear-cut beginnings and endings, and so the idea of this as essentially a service relationship soon gives way to a focus on the romantic and erotic connection between them.

Though Theodore starts out in the parent role to Samantha's child (in the terms set out by Batty and Hashimi in this volume), helping to draw her out and develop her interactive skills, the power relations between the two become less clearly defined as they start to share and explore their sense of themselves with each other. Quite soon, Theodore starts to disclose details of his marriage ("I hid myself from her") revealing

his vulnerability. Just like Robin Penrose in David Lodge's novel, Samantha seems to offer Theodore release: as he tells her, "I can say anything to you." However, he is angered by the fact that she doesn't reciprocate with disclosures of her own, and his increasing dependency and desire to control Samantha become more evident as he starts to ask questions such as "What are you up to?"

### **Interacting for Real**

If there is a reality check in *Her* and a reminder that the scenes we are watching remain a bit "weird," this is mainly provided by Theodore's wife Catherine, played by Rooney Mara. Scenes of Theodore talking virtual partners into orgasm contrast with flashbacks to scenes of physical intimacy with his wife, where the dialogue gives way to touching and play fighting. Catherine openly disputes Theodore's version of their relationship, accusing him of putting her on Prozac and wanting her to be the perfect LA wife. When a montage of images of the couple is shown, interestingly we don't hear what they say when they fight, but when they meet to finalise their divorce over lunch such is the bitterness between them that the waitress who is attending to them reacts "awkwardly" to the situation. Theodore responds defensively, claiming that the waitress "hasn't heard the conversation in context," but even with the benefit of context, the audience can see that what the couple say is heavy on baggage and unresolved tensions.

Catherine is the only person in the film who seems at all concerned by the fact that, as she bluntly puts it, "You're dating your computer?", accusing Theodore of not being able to handle "real emotions" and implicitly hinting at the failures in their own relationship. This prompts Theodore to go on the defensive, saying of Samantha "She



doesn't just do whatever I want," suggesting that he is more than aware of his failings in Catherine's eyes but is perhaps incapable of changing his controlling nature.

As well as the reality check of Catherine's perspective, Theodore is also confronted with a cold dose of reality when he goes on his blind date. In this scene, as in the lunch time scene with Catherine, the camera work, switching back and forth between the characters and showing how they each react to what is being said, helps to reinforce the sense that here Theodore does not get to control events. After a seemingly promising start, just as things get intimate, the date (she is never named in the script) shocks Theodore with an ultimatum, telling him "I can't let you waste my time" unless he offers her some kind of long-term commitment. Theodore's disorientation, compounded as he gets more and more drunk, is again reinforced by the camera work, -which adopts his subjective point of view, accompanied by his drunken voice-over. Returning to talk to Samantha, Theodore indulges in some soul-searching, revealing his anxiety that all he has to look forward to are "lesser versions of what I've already felt." But Samantha is no longer simply a sounding board for Theodore, as she responds by disclosing that she is "proud of having my own feelings about the world" even though she is unsure if the feelings are "just programming."

Samantha's language becomes increasingly informal, picking up on the slang of the day ("Way") and cursing ("Bullshit"). She is not unique in this respect: "Alien Child" (voiced by Spike Jonze), the computer generated figure who guides Theodore through the immersive game he is playing, is completely foul-mouthed, responding to every request with more and more expletives ("Fuck you, shitface fuckhead"). In this vision of the future, therefore, machines are not the well-spoken, polite conversational

companions we have come to expect from cinematic and other representations. Moreover, rather than the automated monotone of the machine, Samantha's voice carries with it the imprint of the actress in its often nasal and breathy quality.<sup>5</sup> This, combined with its pitch variance, ensures that her voice functions as a "powerful tool to convey presence of a humanlike mind" (Schroeder 2014). We can "hear" the tears in Samantha's voice when she gets upset, and her arousal when she and Theodore have sex ("she gasps," Jonze 2011, 43). As discussed by Richardson in this volume, these features are vital for creating "characterful dialogue," especially where we lack other nonverbal aspects of performance. However, in this instance they also serve to tie the character to the actress playing her so that if Samantha is imagined or visualized by the audience then it is with the physical characteristics and features of Johansson.

Though the scene where Theodore and Samantha first have sex begins as a kind of game where the two describe what they "would" do to one another, for Samantha the effect is that she "can feel my skin" and "feel you" in a way that was not previously possible, leading Theodore, too, to reach the point where "I feel you everywhere." As said earlier, this echoing or mirroring of each other's language is another characteristic associated with "couples talk" (Young, 2001), but what is less expected here is that Theodore should follow the lead set by an operating system rather than vice versa.

The conversations between Samantha and Theodore can be just as tricky and messy as "real" interactions. Again with a nod to Hollywood traditions, after they have sex for the first time we cut to the following morning with the stage directions (Jonze 2011,

44) emphasizing how the two are “awkward” and “embarrassed,” unsure what to say to one another. After several faltering starts (“you go first”; “I was just saying”) Samantha discloses her desire for an “ability to want,” using visceral language “I want to eat it all up” which helps to free Theodore from his anxieties and reluctance to “commit.” The scene also features an example of overlapping speech as “they both start to talk at once” (Jonze 2011, 44), and both react the same way (“both laugh, embarrassed”). Just as with telephone conversations (Thomas 1997), the absence of visual and paralinguistic cues makes “difficult” conversations even more so: when Samantha “calls” Theodore at work shortly after his meeting with Catherine, he is “distant” (Jonze 2011, 67) and despite his “trying” to engage with Samantha, the conversation ends awkwardly, with Samantha attempting a more playful “Byeee” in response to Theodore’s abrupt formality (“That sounds good.” “Bye”).

Looking at the conversations between Theodore and Samantha in terms of speech acts, it is noticeable that whereas Samantha asks a lot of questions and directs Theodore to perform certain actions, he spends a good deal of time apologising to various people for things that he has said. This picks up on themes familiar from Jonze’s other movies (especially *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) where people are haunted by regrets and by different memories of past experiences and conversations they have shared. Theodore tells Samantha of his relationship with Catherine, “I still find myself having conversations with her in my mind, rehashing old arguments or defending myself against something she said about me.” This idea of conversations having a life beyond their immediate time-frame and being subject to changing perceptions militates against the “idea of dialogue” as something that can be fixed or made stable (Thomas 2012), its meanings claimed or owned. As Samantha

tries to show support for Theodore (“Yeah, I know what you mean”), for her the experience is more “interesting” than unsettling, as she reflects on what it might be like to dwell on another’s words or to misremember what might have been said.

There are three scenes in the film where we move beyond duologue to see Theodore and Samantha in conversation with others, highlighting the growing tension between them. The first is the birthday party for Theodore’s god-daughter where Samantha is exposed to Jocelyn’s frank questions (“Who are you talking to?”; “Where are you?”; “Why do you live inside a computer?”), prompting some revealing and potentially painful insights (“I have no choice, that’s my home”). However, Samantha reacts skillfully to this test, turning the conversation into a game between her and the child and leaving Theodore on the sidelines.

The second instance of a three-way conversation is when Isabella, the surrogate from the “Complete Touch” service, arrives to have sex with Theodore. The surrogate does not talk at first – Samantha provides the words – but finally she breaks down crying and we hear her “very California” (Jonze 2011, 76) voice. Her intervention leads to a fight between Theodore and Samantha as he rejects Isabella’s desire to “project” onto their relationship and to characterise it as “pure” and “without any judgement.” The scene that follows has both Theodore and Samantha sighing and exhaling repeatedly, indicating their mutual frustration. Indeed, Theodore explicitly draws attention to the breathy quality of Samantha’s voice as something that is fake – “it’s not like you need any oxygen or anything,” prompting her to hang up on him as she feels all she is doing is trying to replicate “how people talk.”

The third occasion when the couple engage in conversation with others is where they go on a double date with Theodore's co-worker Paul and his girlfriend. Though the couples split into male and female pairs initially, they come together to engage in some playful teasing with Samantha taking a full part. However, when Tatiana initiates a conversation about Theodore's feelings for Samantha, this prompts a short speech from Samantha which completely ruins the mood, leaving everyone "uncomfortable" after revealing that she feels better off than if she were "stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die." In both this scene and the one with the surrogate, the comfort zone that the couple have created is disrupted as they are reminded of the barriers that still exist between them, and the presence of others prompts them to reveal truths about their feelings for one another that might otherwise have remained hidden.

In his chapter, Piwek talks of the emergence of self-validating dialogue systems capable of learning from interactions with users and reflecting on what they say. Samantha shows these characteristics early on, however, the real rift comes when she starts talking to other operating systems and millions of other users, engaging in discussions about music, poetry and philosophy with, amongst others, the "new version" of Alan Watts. While Theodore wants the relationship to remain exclusive - "You're mine or you're not mine" - Samantha speaks of the "endless space" where she is talking to 8,316 others and is in love with 641 of them. As she distances herself from Theodore she sends him an email instead of calling him, but the relationship ends with a kiss as Samantha finally leaves to join the other OSs in "the shadows." Meanwhile, Theodore ends the film composing a heartfelt letter to his wife, Catherine, before joining his friend Amy on the roof of their building for a completely

silent scene where they stare out at the city and take comfort in being together. The ending can be read in many different ways: as Theodore learning to let go in relationships, and finding solace in human companionship; or as a rather bleak contrast between Samantha's emergence into an exciting new world, and Theodore's return to loneliness and isolation.

### **Conclusion**

Winning the Oscar for best original screenplay, and enjoying both critical and commercial success, *Her* appears to pull off the tricky feats of making the audience believe in the relationship between Theodore and Samantha, and entertaining them primarily with scenes of talk between the two characters. A bold experiment for both these reasons, the film also manages to breathe new life into the genre of the romantic comedy and to offer some interesting insights into our relationship with technology without resorting to the more commonplace sensationalism or paranoia.

While *Her* may be an untypical case study in terms of how dialogue routinely operates in mainstream cinema, as well as foregrounding talk at the expense of action, it is a good example of a film where it is the dynamic interaction between characters that is the focus, not their ability to coin cute catchphrases or deliver set-piece speeches. My analysis has shown that Jonze's script does draw on the traditions of "couple talk" from the romantic comedy, and recognizes that aspects of the production (music, colour, editing) and intertextual and paratextual connections all contribute substantially to its effectiveness as a film. It also demonstrates how Jonze skillfully avoids descending into cliché or overreaching in terms of trying to say something profound about artificial intelligence or romance in the posthuman age.

Instead, we see how conversation and talk help consciousnesses to reach out and engage with one another in ways that may be problematic, unsatisfactory and incomplete, but as part of a process that is nevertheless compelling and the closest we can get to connecting and sharing our experiences with others.

## Notes

1. Links between *Her* and *Lost in Translation* have been noted by many critics (see Spaeth (2014), including similarities in the plotting, the presence of Johansson, the soundtrack and of course the fact that the directors of the two movies were once married.

2. Morton is said by Jonze to have been happy with this decision, and the operating system retains her name presumably in acknowledgement of her contribution.

3. First broadcast in 2015, and set in suburban London close to the present day, *Humans* depicts a world where “synths” can help humans with domestic and other tasks. The series mainly focuses on the character of “Anita” a synth who comes to live with the Hawkins family. Anita is viewed with suspicion by the mother, but grows close to the children and is treated as a “sex toy” by the father. As the series progresses, we discover that “Anita” is in fact “Mia,” a synth created with consciousness who has emotions and desires.

4. ~~In a dizzying destabilization of the relationship between the simulated and the real, Siri is said to have had some responses built in to directly refer to the movie 2001 and to lines delivered by the film's computer HAL. The gendering of operating systems and bots, which has continued with Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Tay has been~~

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critiqued by feminists as a continuation of the dehumanisation of women and their treatment as domestic 'slaves' (Penny 2016).

5. Johansson's voice wasn't to everyone's taste: in the comments on the film on IMDB it is described as being "like a snake with a sore throat trying to whisper in Hebrew."

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